CHAPTER 9

BROADCAST PERSONALITY MEETS MILITARY PROCEDURE

The soldier listening to Armed Forces Radio during World War II had little interest in the process it took to create programming and deliver it overseas. The man in the field, like the radio audiences in the United States, took the music, sports, news and information for granted -- as long as his favorite shows arrived at their scheduled times. The only names he associated with AFRS were of the stars themselves. Even so, the staff, with their backgrounds in commercial radio, gave the organization its unique character. They ensured its wartime success, and helped establish precedents that have survived to this day.

With Tom Lewis as the driving force behind military radio, the organization approached the sophistication of a network operation. His staff attempted to function as it would have in normal commercial setting.

AFRS personnel had reason to feel at home. They were stationed in Hollywood, first at the Fox Studio on Western Avenue and then in permanent facilities on Santa Monica Boulevard. They did the same work with the same radio stars with whom they'd worked as civilians. Virtually the entire staff had joined the Army, either voluntarily or through the draft, yet AFRS had no barracks or military quarters. Instead, those from the Los Angeles area simply commuted from their homes. Out-of-towners found their own accommodations. Thus, except for the uniforms, the life of an AFRS soldier was not the classical prototype.

Lewis had brought many of his men into AFRS directly from their commercial radio jobs. He and they had little or no knowledge of the military. Some had even bypassed basic training.(1)

On the other hand, the Army considered AFRS a military organization, and its men were to be soldiers first and broadcasters second. It was a tricky tightrope Lewis and his staff walked, between the creative chaos of broadcasting and the rigid discipline of the Armed Forces.

Creative chaos usually won. For writer Bob Lee, who helped Lewis draw up the blueprint for AFRS, the headquarters existed in "a marvelous and creative confusion." He says it was Lewis' "personal magnetism, an enormous personal magnetism," and his prestige that brought the greatest writers, directors, and musicians to AFRS. It instilled in them "a loyalty and purpose that was simply wonderful." Tom Lewis's attitude was "that of an inspired gardener. He walked from one plot to another, watered the plants and put fertilizer in where it was needed." Alan Hewitt, who worked in the decommercializing unit, said this effort produced "a fantastic creative staff and a fantastic output every week."(2)

Tom Lewis ran AFRS as he had his civilian productions. He created an operation that was much like the major networks. The Army, on the other hand, had little experience in dealing with the likes of Tom Lewis and the commercial radio industry. Since AFRS functioned as a support agency with few men and a limited budget, strategic military planners paid him little attention. Lewis charismatically navigated through the highest echelons of both the Army and the broadcasting business and had little problem filling his material and manpower needs in Washington. In Hollywood, his staff had the freedom to create programming that would break new ground and give birth to a worldwide broadcasting operation on its own merit.

CHAOS VERSUS THE ARMY

Without exception, Lewis's staff appreciated the fortunate circumstances that had enabled them to continue to use their civilian skills while in uniform. Jerry Hausner, who fulfilled many roles including announcer, editor and official photographer, was too old to have gone overseas to combat. He also failed in his request for an assignment to the AFRS station in Rome after it's liberation.(3)

Alan Hewitt worked with Hausner. He remembers that some of the men "felt self-conscious" about being in Hollywood and put in for overseas duty. "O.K., I wore glasses then," he said. "I was near-sighted. Oddly enough, I qualified as a sharpshooter with a rifle, and I never had known anything about guns. It was unlikely that I was going to see service in the trenches, but I could have worked at radio stations whether in Asia or Europe. I don't think any of us suspected that we'd really see combat, but being energetic and imaginative people, there was an experience, a personal experience, to be had from going overseas."(4)

The Army did recognize the possible effect that their office environment might have on the staff's morale. Hewitt recalls that officers came out from Washington to give pep talks. He told us "not to feel guilty because we were here, not to feel any shame about not being overseas when our friends and people were getting killed. We should not feel shame or guilt because we were doing a very important job. We got those morale talks several times."(5)

While they did not assume the risks of death, the men

in the AFRS headquarters otherwise worked just like any other soldier. They carried out their assignments without reference to the clock or themselves personally. It was a "rather bizarre exotic place" writer Lloyd Shearer found when he transferred to AFRS in 1943, referring to the juxtaposition of his profession and the Army.(6)

Each man who worked at AFRS headquarters has his own recollections of life as a soldier/broadcaster in wartime Hollywood. Writers such as Sherwood Schwartz were able to ply their craft in the service much as they had in commercial radio. For Schwartz, however, the transition from writing for Bob Hope to writing AFRS programs proved to be "extraordinary." One week he was touring Army camps with Hope writing shows and having dinner with generals. Two weeks later, he was undergoing basic training with buck privates.

After his induction, Schwartz tried to arrange for an immediate assignment to his civilian specialty. Unfortunately, when he ended up doing his eight weeks of basic training, he lost hope of becoming a broadcaster. The very day before his unit shipped out to the Aleutians, Schwartz received orders to report to AFRS. He was delighted.

"Considering what I knew about myself as a fighting man with a rifle shooting at somebody, anything I could do at a typewriter would be better. I'm convinced of that."(7)

Once settled into AFRS, Schwartz resumed writing comedy, producing sequences for all the major shows and responding to calls from the directors "where the need arose." Schwartz recalls his most memorable Army experience, which also produced "the biggest laugh I've ever had in my life."

"We were working on the two-part Dick Tracy Wedding.' It featured Crosby as Tracy, Bob Hope as Flat Top, Frank Sinatra as Shakey, and Jimmy Durante as the Mole. Catching Flat Top in the midst of a crime, Tracy confronted him, 'This is Dick Tracy. Stick'em up.' In turn, Shakey surprised Tracy and ordered him to `Stick'em up.' The Mole was then to appear with the same command. Instead of saying 'Stick'em up,' Durante ad libbed, 'Stick *it* up! Hot dog!' That produced a-seven-minute laugh from the soldier audience attending the session."

That ad lib might have worked in civilian life, but this was the Army. As Schwartz ruefully recalls, the censor found the dialogue more than offensive and excised the whole scene "because that was not fit for soldiers' ears."(8)

Such censorship problems were, of course, not unique to AFRS writers during the 1940's. What Schwartz and his fellow staffers hadn't faced during their civilian radio days was the Army's attempt to impose military discipline onto AFRS. As one can imagine, a general disregard of Army regulations developed within the professionals within their first year. So, the Army assigned a regular officer to AFRS, Captain Virginal Petito. Petito, who'd been serving as the Adjutant to Frank Capra's film unit, became Lewis's Adjutant with orders to straighten up the radio soldiers.

He was very "GI" and very eager. "You guys are in the Army now. I don't give a damn whether you're going to do radio shows or not, you're going to fulfill your military duties. So you're gonna stand inspection every morning." Petito initiated an 0600 roll call and drill, before going to their offices and beginning work. Then the trouble started.(9)

Schwartz said trying to write jokes at 6:15 in the morning was "a little much." As a result, he and his colleagues initially just ignored Petito's efforts. Hausner said, "the guy doesn't know what the hell we're supposed to do here. We know the Commanding Officer well enough to call him by his first name. This guy has no power at all unless we give him power."

So, with roll call over, the men fell into the habit of going to breakfast. As Schwartz explained, they'd come back "at a more reasonable hour, like 7:30, and start the mind going on funny things."(10)

Now, Petito believed the Army was the Army. Once he realized what was happening, he posted a notice. Anybody who failed to go immediately to his desk after roll call would be put on work detail policing the grounds. In company defiance, Schwartz and his colleagues went off to breakfast the next morning anyway. They returned to find the officer waiting with orders to get into fatigues and pull the weeds from the officers' parking lot.(11)

When the other AFRS officers arrived for work that day, Austin Peterson, one of Lewis's original recruits and top aides, demanded to know what was going on. One of the men explained, "Well, we were naughty and we're pulling weeds as punishment."

"Who's writing the week's programs?" he asked.

"Who knows?" was the response, citing only Petito's orders. Peterson headed straight for Petito's office.

"Captain, if you have men who pull weeds for a living, would you have them write jokes as punishment?" He continued, "When you have men who write jokes, you cannot punish them by making them pull weeds."(12) Petito didn't give up easily, on occasion, he'd call a meeting of the entire staff to inform them that they were going to observe military courtesy. "Everybody'd listen and then go on about doing whatever they had to do." Petito slowly "got the message that there were other things to do and that we couldn't spend all our time just keeping house and playing Army," Jerry Hausner said.(13)

Military rank had no meaning. As in civilian broadcasting, money and symbols of status didn't matter during the creative process. As a civilian writer, Schwartz often had to work as an equal partner with a producer who earned less than he did. "Money doesn't matter in the creative process, and neither does rank. In a creative situation, it's only opinion and arrival at the truth," states Schwartz.(14)

At AFRS, Private Bob Welch, the producer of "Command Performance," would tell Sergeant George Rosenberg, the talent producer, which stars he needed for his program. During the show, Welch would direct Major Meredith Wilson, the conductor of the orchestra.

Lester Linsk, a talent agent in civilian life and one of the talent recruiters for AFRS, also remembers how little heed Private Welch paid to rank. In preparation for the first visit to AFRS by senior commanders from Washington, Lewis prepared the staff to brief the contingent on each of their jobs. When the officers arrived in Welch's office, he was on the phone, apparently involved in a very important conversation. In truth, he was talking with Linsk who was telling him that the officers were on their way upstairs. Instead of immediately standing up and launching into his presentation, Welch continued to talk with Linsk while balancing from foot to foot. Finally, he looked up kind of sheepishly, talked some more and hung up. Then he explained to the general that he was talking with Lester Linsk, as if Linsk were someone of the importance of Eisenhower. The general never questioned it!(15)

On occasion, Tom Lewis would have to argue with Washington. If the military wanted radio, it would have to accept their flexibility and even a lack of overt activity. On one inspection trip, for example, a general discovered a writer in his cubical in front of a typewriter staring into space. He finally asked the man what he did. When he responded, "I'm a writer, Sir," the general observed, "I've been standing here for five minutes and you haven't written a word!"

Linsk acknowledges that some staff members may have respected rank and military command more than others. AFRS presented an unusual circumstance.

"I, for example, was the producer of 'Showtime' featuring Dinah Shore. I'd sit in the control room with the rank of sergeant, I think ultimately a tech sergeant, telling colonels what to do. How much military chain of command can you have under those conditions?" Linsk accepted the reality that he was in the Army all right. He'd have to perform such functions as polishing his belt buckle "to the extent that you had to. In that respect AFRS was a peculiar beast and you couldn't 'Sir' everybody because that was not the way it worked."(17)

Officers in charge of the decommercializing unit were responsible for supervising the work. "We knew far more about this than they did and I don't think they ever overruled us on anything," recalled Hewitt. Protocol never entered into the daily life of the headquarters. "We were discreetly on a first-name basis with all the officers."

Despite his failure to be sent overseas, Alan Hewitt acknowledged the contribution which he and his fellow broadcasters made to the war effort. "We had proof of it in the mail that we got from overseas. We had pitches on lots of shows for requests from the soldiers on what they wanted to hear. We had tremendous mail every week, tremendous. In those letters, we'd get firsthand feedback from people telling us what a good job we were doing and how important AFRS was to them."(20)

Unlike some of his more enthusiastic colleagues, Schwartz had a more realistic view of the contribution his AFRS career had on the war effort. Even considering his agent's plea to write a play about AFRS once he'd returned to civilian life, Schwartz said he didn't think the postwar generation would "find the efforts of people such as we were, dramatically important in the war." Rather than helping to win the conflict, AFRS was simply "doing a job to help the people who were winning the war. In that sense, we were helping. Certainly, we weren't [ourselves] winning the war.'"(21)

Schwartz finally convinced "Command Performance" producer Bob Welch, who did want to write the play about AFRS, that there had been no drama in their work. No one had gotten shot. No bombs had gone off. No one had died on Santa Monica Boulevard putting out their programs. "Whether we write a better or worse joke for a 'Command Performance' or whether Bob Hope does it or some lesser known person does it, is not earth shaking. It's not going to shake people or upset them. No play can be written where nothing is at stake."(22)

Actor Howard Duff, who had a better view than most of the actual contribution which AFRS made to the war effort, agrees with Schwartz. After spending two years in an infantry unit, he arrived at the Hollywood office in 1943. He worked in the decommercializing unit and did some producing, and then went to the Pacific as an AFRS correspondent. From there, he went to Iwo Jima where he started the island's radio station.

While acknowledging the success of AFRS in producing so many programs every week, Duff observed, "God knows, we didn't win any engagements. I don't know that we thought we were ever doing anything important. We thought we were doing something useful. At least I did. I don't think we were moving any worlds. Heck, no."(23)

The information mission of AFRS, which Generals Marshall and Osborn considered as its primary role, at times may have seemed secondary to its entertainment

function. The entertainment side surely wouldn't win the war. As Duff points out, "there was nothing for guys to do in many areas, those who were not actually fighting, except to hang around and listen to the radio. From that standpoint, I guess we helped them."(24)

Early AFRS was simply a composition of broadcasting professionals doing what they did best. They were sincere. They were soldiers. They worked hard and long. They were where they belonged.

Ask any soldier whom they touched with their "little bit of home," and the reply is quickly forthcoming.

"Man, they sure helped."

Now, it was time to expand.

NOTES - CHAPTER 9

(1) Symposium, July 13, 1983.
(2) Interview with Jerry Lee, September 30, 1982; Interview with Alan Hewitt, January 2, 1983.
(3) Interview with Jerry Hausner, July 2, 1983.
(4) Hewitt Interview.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Interview with Lloyd Shearer, July 7, 1983.
(7) Interview with Sherwood Schwartz, August 1, 1983.
(8) Ibid.
(9) Ibid; Hausner Interview.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Schwartz Interview.
(12) Ibid.
(13) Interview with Lester Linsk, June 27, 1983; Hausner inteview.
(14) Schwartz Interview.
(15) Ibid.
(16) Ibid.
(17) Linsk Interview.
(18) Hewitt Interview.
(19) Shearer Interview.
(20) Hewitt Interview.
(21) Schwartz Interview.
(22) Ibid.
(23) Interview with Howard Duff, June 27, 1983.
(24) Ibid.